

We Once Hunted for Buffalo, We Now Hunt for Knowledge: The Instructional Leadership of Chief Joseph Chasing Horse

By Richard Shope, 11/14/1998

We were greeted warmly by the museum curator, who seemed genuinely concerned about the culturally-sensitive issues raised by the display of Lakota artifacts. As we entered the wing that depicted "The Conquest of the West," Lakota leader Joseph Chasing Horse paused before the Gatling gun and whispered to me, "My grandmothers and grandfathers were killed by this gun, all the women and children, and the young men. I still feel the piercing of the bullets as I stand here." We walked on, observing the buffalo diorama, the sacred pipe, and the beaded dress, whose designs tell stories of she who once wore it. Behind the glass in one display case is a photograph of a Bureau of Indian Affairs schoolhouse in South Dakota at the turn of the century. Forty or so Lakota children are decked out in ill-fitting Victorian-era school uniforms, hair cut short, expressions set stoically—for the boarding schools had removed them from their families, disallowed them their Lakota language, denied them their Lakota ways. What does it mean now to be an instructional leader among the Lakota?

I spoke with an instructional leader from the Lakota Nation, representing a people who traditionally educate their children by direct experience and through oral traditions carried from generation to generation by the elders and spiritual leaders within their society. Joseph Chasing Horse is the present generation's spiritual leader, centered in the Black Hills area of South Dakota, consisting of seven councils, numbering about 97,000 people in a mostly economically depressed condition—where the unemployment rate runs as high as 85%. Many of the Lakota people live in government housing and many of the children attend the boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Traditionally, the Lakota educate their children experientially in the doings of day-to-day life and formally through the oral traditions expressed through sacred ceremonies that included mimetic dance, songs, and stories that carried a rich reservoir of knowledge distilled by generations of telling and transformed by contemporary experiences. Yet, there was no early recognition by the American government that an educational tradition existed among the Lakota, or any other Indian group. BIA boarding schools were conceived as a way to "civilize" a "savage" people. The BIA boarding school has a long history and reputation as an institution that forcibly separated children from their families, punitively discouraged any expression of their native language and culture and yet also failed to prepare them for success within mainstream

American culture. In more recent years some changes have improved the situation, with the advent of more local community control, increased parental involvement, and renewed encouragement of the indigenous language, culture, and oral traditions. Schools such as the Grass Mountain School on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota are innovating through curriculum changes inspired by traditional Lakota teachings and experiential instruction.

Joseph Chasing Horse is a direct descendant of the great spiritual and military leader, Crazy Horse. Among the Lakota, this is an honored lineage that carries with it, great responsibilities toward the succeeding generations. Crazy Horse himself urged his people to consider their actions in light of the lives of those seven generations to come. While Crazy Horse is known in the American history books as the Sioux Chief who defeated Custer in his last stand, among his own people, he was also known as a great teacher, orator, and spiritual leader, whose actions and words continue to inspire the present generation.

As a young man in the late 1960s and early 70s, Joseph Chasing Horse participated in the stirrings for freedom that gave rise to the American Indian Movement (AIM). Yet he chose a different route than direct political activism. He engaged in a quest to restore and revive the broken and nearly lost Lakota traditions. As he puts it, "As my people once hunted for buffalo, now we hunt for knowledge." Over a period of eleven years, he conducted a series of recorded interviews with Lakota elders each of whom had a part of the whole Lakota story. As he listened, he recorded and translated the words of the elders from Lakota to English. One result was a publication by the Sinte Gleska University of a book entitled *Lakota Star Knowledge*. This book describes the Lakota constellations in the context of their practical lives and the stories that communicate spiritual meaning. While using the tools of the anthropologist, Chasing Horse has been doing the work of the traditional spiritual and instructional leader, gathering the knowledge in order to assume his place as one who conducts the sacred ceremonies, within which the knowledge of the people unfolds. He has been instrumental in reviving the Sun Dance ceremony, a Plains tradition that had been outlawed until 1978. The Sun Dance ceremony has drawn together people from many Indian nations and has been a force for inter-tribal unity. He is also

the spiritual assistant to elder Arvol Looking Horse, the Nineteenth Carrier of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe, one of the most sacred instruments in the Lakota spiritual tradition. Chasing Horse has been involved in preserving Native American sacred sites and is an activist in saving the last remaining free-roaming bison herd in Yellowstone National Park. Chief Joseph speaks about the great relationship of healing, community, and the natural world. He participates in national and international conferences, such as the recent Global Climate Change Conference sponsored by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that brought together Native American leaders from across the country. He is an ambassador to the United Nations for the Lakota Nation, speaking out on human rights issues as they affect Native Americans. World-wide, he conducts spiritual ceremonies and activities and is a consultant for the Native American Cultural and Educational Services. He gives talks on the teachings of the Lakota elders and the influence of their traditions upon our world cultures. He was also called upon to advise Kevin Costner's 1988 production of *Dances With Wolves*, particularly with respect to the film's historical and linguistic authenticity. His son Nathan Chasing Horse appeared in the film as the character *Smiles A Lot*. He is responsible for educating his son to take his place as a future spiritual and instructional leader of the Lakota.

Lakota curriculum draws from the entire body of knowledge carried by the oral traditions, the recorded winter counts, the star maps, and the sacred bundles that contain objects endowed with meaning that can be unraveled only by the elder who is its keeper. Joseph Chasing Horse has organized the content conceptually through oral traditions related through the symbol of the "medicine wheel," a term more accurately and poetically translated as "The Circle of Light Where the Four Winds Meet." Many sacred sites exist through the Midwestern and Canadian plains, especially in the Big Horn Mountains of Montana, that consist of circles of stones, with astronomically significant placements of cairns in a variety of configurations. There is strong anthropological evidence that such sites reflect long-term observations of alignments of constellations, solstices, and helical risings at significant times of the year, serving a calendrical as well as a ceremonial function.

The Circle of Light Where the Four Winds Meet is a multi-layered symbol that, like a seed, is a compact way of containing a great store of knowledge that unfolds and branches out in many directions. In a sense, the Circle serves as an advanced organizer that contains the entire structure of Lakota knowledge. For example, the Circle is divided into four quadrants, each referring to one of the four cardinal directions, the four winds, the four colors, the four seasons, the four elements, the four significant constellations, the four categories of creatures, the four categories of geological features, the four types of weather, and so on. Such a four-fold pattern resonates symbolically and provides a mnemonic structure for the keeper of the oral traditions. Visually, it evokes a sense of cyclical order. The fourness and the circularity also combine to create a worldview, a lens through which the world takes on meaning.

Another element of the Lakota educational tradition is the use of the tipi, or more accurately, Tee-chee-ka, "the place where we touch the ground." The Tee-chee-ka served as living quarters, and special larger Tee-chee-kas served as gathering places to teach the children. One way it was used involved looking through the opening, out to the parade of passing stars. The teacher, elder, star-gazer, or spiritual leader, would use the constellation in view as a way to focus the stories for the learning to take place.

These structures were fractured by the manifest destiny events of the 19th Century, yet are being pieced together again by leaders such as Joseph Chasing Horse, in the hopes that Lakota language and life-style will flourish and succeed in the broader context of 21st Century life. Joseph Chasing Horse is leading also by sharing his knowledge with the mainstream American world with the consent of the elders and with a desire to contribute to the fabric of American life, by asserting a more accurate representation of who the Lakota were then and are today. He also instructs by encouraging the youth to engage selectively in drawing from the best of both worlds, the Lakota traditions and the pluralistic American society, to find a pathway to success.

The instructional leadership of Chief Joseph Chasing Horse runs in two main directions characterized by a holistic structure and ever-present sense of interconnectedness:

- INSTRUCTION THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: Devising instructional approaches to enable the Lakota people to re-integrate their own traditions as a vital way of life in today's world, and especially to create a pathway of success for Lakota youth, preserving cultural identity while also moving into the 21st Century with all that it entails—technological savvy, environmental awareness, and a voice of conscience that makes a difference;
- INSTRUCTION THROUGH ORAL TRADITIONS: Sharing traditional knowledge in ways that benefit all people, participating with elders, star-gazers, and spiritual leaders in a spirit of inter-tribal unity to reach out to mainstream America and the World to increase global awareness, particularly about human rights and ecological interdependence.

In the Black Hills area, Joseph Chasing Horse offers experiential learning opportunities for elementary through college-age youth from seven different local schools. He leads groups on outdoor hikes to the sacred sites, teaches them wilderness survival skills according to the Lakota traditions. He teaches awareness of the plant and animal life, reflecting on the natural surroundings, the waterways, the mountains, the stars, placing them in relation to one another. The experience also includes the celebration of ceremonies, the telling of stories, the singing of songs, and the enactment of narrative dances. Around the country, he also works with imprisoned youth, bringing the experiential Lakota ceremonies to them.

This experiential approach hearkens back to an era when the children were generally near the adults most of the time. Learning was participatory, consisting of watching, listening, and doing alongside the adults, whether it was weaving, hunting, tanning buffalo hides, or star-gazing. Schooling was not a separate institution, but an integral part of the way the generations related. The elders guided at the highest spiritual and instructional levels, these were the star-gazers, the medicine people; the younger adults guided the practical and technological levels, cultivating crops, gathering the dried red willow and other herbal medicines, building living quarters, hunting buffalo, utilizing every part. Both spiritual and instructional activities were integrated into the cycles of practical living and ceremonial celebration.

As part of the Native American Initiative within the Outer Planets/Solar Probe Project's educational outreach program at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Chief Joseph Chasing Horse is participating as a Lakota representative, placing traditional star knowledge side by side with NASA knowledge of space science and astronomy. The initial instruction involves an exchange of stories, listening first to Joseph's telling of a Lakota star knowledge story followed by a NASA scientist relating astronomy and space science knowledge.

By comparing the two sources of knowledge, we find some elements in common: designated skywatchers (star-gazers or astronomers), detailed long-term observation of astronomical events, construction of observatories, the naming of constellations through the projecting of a correspondence between events in the sky and events on the Earth (as above, so below).

We also find differences: Lakota astronomy and spiritual experience are inseparable; within Western astronomy, spiritual awe may be acknowledged, but it is separated out from the scientific process of obtaining data and developing verifiable cause and effect explanations.

We also find interesting coincidences: a Lakota story referring to an event or object in the sky may bear a remarkable resemblance to a scientific explanation. The scientific theory, based on observation and a scientific method, may seem to confirm the mythopoetic insight, that is based on observation and an intuitive mysticism. This raises interesting questions for classroom discussion: Does the science confirm the insight? Does the insight anticipate the science? Do we in fact carry both domains simultaneously in our thinking about things? Out of this comparative work will emerge curriculum materials that serve as a bridge of intercultural communication. Mainstream American schoolchildren may find a new way to learn more about Native American cultures and in the process be drawn to take a new look at the night sky. Consequently, the space science knowledge will be made more available and accessible to educational institutions that serve Lakota and other Native American youth.

He is seated cross-legged upon a buffalo robe, the aroma of burning sweetgrass filling the room. Behind him is a backdrop of the night sky filled with stars. His voice evokes the image of the Lakota people moving with the seasonal migration of the buffalo, people of the Sun, in a great circle centered at the Black Hills of South Dakota. The skies above mirror what is below, in constellations that hold the history and the knowledge of the people in their shining shapes. The buffalo no longer roam freely. "We once hunted for buffalo, we now hunt for knowledge. Come into my classroom," he invites us, "Leave your square buildings, and come walk with to the sacred mountain. Come sit with me within the Tee-chee-ka, where we touch the ground and look out to the stars. Come learn through the Circle of Light Where the Four Winds Meet...."

We who are leaders involved in the field of education often look to schools within other countries to inspire our ideas for systemic change in American schools. Most often we look to other highly industrialized societies, such as Japan and Germany for our models, thinking that our goal is to find ways to keep that globally competitive edge in order to lead our children into the 21st Century, that futuristic symbol of modernity and technological prowess. But there are many other voices that speak with wisdom that we can learn from as we move into the new millennium. Out of the epic sadness at the tragic decimation of Native American peoples comes a prophetic renewal of strength and inter-tribal unity. Elders, spiritual leaders, and teachers are emerging to heal the past with new expressions of traditional knowledge, offering relevant instructional approaches for the American education system to consider.

One of the many mistakes of American governmental policy toward Indian peoples was a failure to comprehend—and therefore, underestimate—tribal leadership structure. The notion of "chief" as a hierarchical pinnacle of political authority was ethnocentrically blind. When a treaty was to be signed, the Government authorities would seek out a chief to sign on the dotted line (usually signing away land rights). Thinking they had the full agreement of those in power, the Americans were rudely awakened when their attempts to take land were rebuffed by those who would fight for their territory. One tragic misunderstanding after another and seemingly no lessons were ever learned. For in reality, the leadership structure was much more complex and subtle than American bureaucracy was (and is) ready to understand.

Traditional tribal leadership was based on acknowledged moral authority. Those who through their gifts of oratory, acts of heroism, and wisdom, became chiefs and elders whose opinions influenced the community by persuasion, insinuation, and nods of approval or disapproval. Elders

were and are today held in the highest esteem and their opinions hold sway among the people and over the younger leaders, the chiefs, as well. Their power is not in the rank that they hold, but in the moral authority they have acquired by maintaining wise advice and good actions. The moral authority is a product of consensus building. Groups of elders come together respectfully, but no one has final authority. A consensus must emerge, which may take time as patient moral suasion through oratory and the sharing of ceremonies ultimately bring about an agreement.

An example is the relatively recent transformation of attitude among elders about the sharing of traditional knowledge with the outer world. Sacred stories were closely guarded secrets. In the last few years, many elders have agreed to authentic efforts to record, preserve, and invigorate traditions by sharing the knowledge. Such a profound change of attitude took many years of patient consensus building. Before sharing Lakota star knowledge with NASA/JPL, Chief Joseph Chasing Horse obtained both tacit and explicit approval by Lakota and other tribal elders, empowering him to act with his own moral authority.

The instructional leadership of Joseph Chasing Horse resembles *transformational leadership*, within a milieu that Leithwood describes as “based on a radically different form of power that is consensual and facilitative in nature, a form of power manifested *through* other people, not *over* other people.”¹ By the very nature of his varied constituencies: the Lakota community in South Dakota, the inter-tribal community across the Nation, the international community through the United Nations, and the education and public outreach community through NASA/JPL, Joseph Chasing Horse has no bureaucratic or hierarchical claim to authority. Rather, He empowers those who participate with him as he seeks purposeful change. His articulate oratory inspires hope, optimism, and sense of purpose, as he nurtures and nudges people into action. All of these are characteristic of a transformational leadership style.

His classroom is the world. His curriculum is based on Lakota knowledge, transforming ancient traditions into contemporary and relevant applications. His instructional leadership is energized by his conviction that all sources of knowledge must work together as we face the implications of our global and ecological interdependence, for seven generations to come.

¹ Leithwood, K.A. (1992, February). The move toward transformational leadership. Educational Leadership, p.9.